

WASHINGTON (AP) -- In a major victory for President Barack Obama, Democrats muscled a \$787 billion stimulus bill to final passage Friday night in hopes of combating the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Republican opposition was nearly unanimous.

The vote in the House was 246-183 for the package of tax cuts and federal spending that Obama made the centerpiece of his plan for economic recovery.

The Senate followed suit in a roll call that was without suspense but extended into the night. That was to allow time for Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown to fly back from Ohio, where his mother died earlier in the week. His was the decisive vote for the bill, which passed late Friday night, 60-38, with three GOP moderates providing crucial support.

Supporters said the measure would save or create 3.5 million jobs. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer conceded that there was no guarantee, but he said that "millions and millions and millions of people will be helped, as they have lost their jobs and can't put food on the table of their families."

Vigorously disagreeing, House Republican leader John Boehner of Ohio dumped a copy of the 1,071-page bill to the floor in a gesture of contempt. "The bill that was about jobs, jobs, jobs has turned into a bill that's about spending, spending, spending," he said. No House Republican voted for the measure. All 246 votes in favor were cast by Democrats. Seven Democrats joined 176 Republicans in opposition.

Nebraska's three U.S. House members, all Republicans, voted against the legislation.

"When you really look at this bill, it's frightening," said Rep. Lee Terry of Omaha.

Republicans could have supported a smaller stimulus package that was more focused on helping small businesses and the manufacturing sector, Terry said. Infrastructure spending also would have some bipartisan support, he said.

Simply boosting government spending on unemployment benefits, food stamps and other areas does not represent economic stimulus, Terry said.

The legislation, among the costliest ever considered in Congress, provides billions of dollars to aid victims of the recession through unemployment benefits, food stamps, medical care, job retraining and more. Tens of billions are ticketed for the states to offset cuts they might otherwise have to make in aid to schools and local governments, and there is more than \$48 billion for transportation projects such as road and bridge construction, mass transit and high-speed rail.

Democrats said the bill's tax cuts would help 95 percent of all Americans, much of the relief in the form of a break of \$400 for individuals and \$800 for couples. At the insistence of the White House, people who do not earn enough money to owe income taxes also are eligible, an attempt to offset the payroll taxes they pay.

In a bow to political reality, lawmakers included \$70 billion to protect middle and upper-middle-class taxpayers from an increase in the Alternative Minimum Tax. The AMT was intended primarily for high-income taxpayers but has in recent years threatened to engulf those lower down the income scale. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said the provision would do relatively little to create jobs.

Also included were funds for two of Obama's initiatives, the expansion of computerized information technology in the health care industry and billions to create so-called green jobs the administration says will begin reducing the country's dependence on foreign oil.

The day's events at the Capitol were scripted to allow Democratic leaders to fulfill their pledge to send Obama legislation by mid-February.

"Barack Obama, in just a few short weeks as president, has passed one of the biggest packages for economic recovery in our nation's history," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, anticipating final Senate passage.

The approval also capped an early period of accomplishment for the Democrats, who won control of the White House and expanded their majorities in Congress in last fall's elections.

Since taking office Jan. 20, the president has signed legislation extending government-financed health care to millions of lower-income children who lack it, a bill that President George W. Bush twice vetoed. He also has placed his signature on a measure making it easier for workers to sue their employers for alleged job discrimination, effectively overturning a ruling by the Supreme Court's conservative majority.

Obama made the stimulus a cornerstone of his economic recovery plan even before he took office.

The New Deal of the 1930s equaled no more than 2 percent of the nation's gross domestic product. The new legislation represents over 5 percent and is probably no more than an opening bid -- Obama and his congressional allies will next turn to the foreclosure crisis, the reform of financial markets and an overhaul of federal budget practices.

"Passing this plan is a critical step," Obama said at the White House early Friday. "But as important as it is, it's only the beginning of what we must do to turn our economy around."

Obama's calls for bipartisanship were an early casualty in the drive for a stimulus measure.

Republicans complained that they had been locked out of the early decisions, and Democrats

countered that Boehner had tried to rally opposition even before the president met privately with the GOP rank and file.

In retrospect, said White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, the White House wasn't "sharp enough" in emphasizing the benefits of the bill as Republicans began to criticize spending on items such as family planning services, anti-smoking programs and reseeding the National Mall.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid faced a different task -- finding enough GOP moderates to give him the 60 votes needed to surmount a variety of procedural hurdles. To do that, he and the White House agreed to trim billions in spending from the original \$820 billion House-passed bill, enough to obtain the backing of GOP Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins of Maine and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania.

Nebraska's U.S. senators split on the final version of the stimulus bill, with Democrat Ben Nelson in favor and Republican Mike Johanns opposed.

Nelson, one of the architects of the compromise bill, said the measure isn't perfect. But the Congress had to act to address rising unemployment and the slumping national economy.

"Job losses in my state of Nebraska and across the nation are climbing, and the recession that began some 13 months ago is accelerating," he said. "Of the 3.6 million Americans who have lost their jobs, nearly half received the pink slip in the last three months."

Nelson said the bill has won the support of business groups such as the National Association of Manufacturers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce.

"Members of these groups will be able to use money from this legislation quickly to hire new workers, tackle infrastructure needs nationwide, expand their businesses and begin to get our economy moving again," he said.

Johanns said the bill was weighed down with provisions that won't stimulate the economy.

"I believe there is a need to provide direct relief to average families and homebuyers during these challenging economic times. This bill does not do that," Johanns said in a statement.

"In fact, tax relief for small businesses and lower- and middle-income taxpayers was drastically reduced in the conference bill. It only provides around \$8 per week in tax relief for working men and women across our nation."

World-Herald staff writer Joseph Morton contributed to this report, which includes material from the Washington Post.

